

State must start working harder to find an education-funding fix

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Seattle Times illustration

State lawmakers are trying to agree on a plan to plan for how to solve the state's education funding mess. They must do better than that.

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The Seattle Times

SKEPTICISM should abound when lawmakers talk about solving hard problems at some point in the future.

The current crop of lawmakers, nearly three weeks into a 60-day session, have rallied around the common cause of solving the state's broken education-financing system ... next year.

But this week, even this half-measure became the source of political brush fires. For the sake of the 1 million public-school children, lawmakers should douse the flames and commit to bipartisan negotiations on the real fix for school funding.

The problem needs context. Democrats and Republicans share blame for mismanaging education funding so badly, and for so many decades, that the state Supreme Court had to drop the hammer with its 2012 McCleary ruling.

The McCleary ruling required the Legislature to match its promises with action. The ruling requires the Legislature fund schools at the level that the Legislature itself set — and set with specific deadlines. That job is on track to being fulfilled — lawmakers pumped an additional \$1.3 billion into education last July.

But the McCleary ruling also ordered the Legislature to stop foisting the financial burden of basic education onto local school levies. That's been the pattern for at least five decades. The gap between what the state should pay for but does not is estimated at about \$3.5 billion, an eye-watering amount.

Fixing a financing problem built for decades will be complicated, require a massive shift in property taxes and probably should include a new revenue source, such as a capital-gains tax. These are tough, but necessary, political tasks. The court set a deadline of 2018.

Instead of tackling this task head-on this year — rather than leaving it to the last minute next year — a bipartisan group of lawmakers huddled. Bipartisan bills in the [state House](#) and [Senate](#) commit the Legislature to ending the local reliance on local levies next year, after yet another unnecessary study of the problem is finished.

This is only a plan to plan, but would at least be the first time the Legislature has committed to tackling the problem before 2018. It is weak enough that the Supreme Court — which has already rapped lawmakers' knuckles with \$100,000-a-day fines — might break out a bigger ruler.

But this week, Democrats seized on some wording changes passed by a Republican-led Senate committee to portray the GOP as going wobbly. There are reasons to be concerned — the changes eliminated a provision that explicitly committed next year's Legislature to the levy reform and the revenue discussions that would flow from it.

But Democrats have their own political problems because the big fix should also include changes to collective bargaining for teachers.

Skepticism abounds. Faced with this daunting challenge, the Legislature can agree only that it can't be solved this year, when the entire House, half the Senate and the governor are up for re-election.

Meanwhile, nearly 70,000 students will graduate from a school system with broken financing and often inadequate outcomes.

Lawmakers need to keep their eye on those kids, douse the brush fires and begin now the hard negotiations necessary to reach agreement — even if it doesn't come until next year.

Editorial board members are editorial page editor Kate Riley, Frank A. Blethen, Ryan Blethen, Brier Dudley, Mark Higgins, Jonathan Martin, Thanh Tan, Blanca Torres, William K. Blethen (emeritus) and Robert C. Blethen (emeritus).